

Testimony of Dale Conoscenti
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March 3, 1992

Before the United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition
and Forestry.

I greatly appreciate this opportunity to testify. The national school lunch program is at a crossroads. It is important that the program not make the wrong turn.

I am very concerned about recent trends. I believe that the best school lunch is the lunch that is freshly prepared at the school, and that is healthy. This means lunches low in saturated fats, cholesterol, sugar and sodium. I know it takes extra work to strain the grease out of the USDA hamburger that's delivered to the schools.

For example, my school gets ground pork and ground beef laden with fat from USDA. I get it in 9 pound blocks. When I saute 40 to 50 pounds of it I end up with three gallons of fat. I bake the 3 ounce beef patties I get from USDA on screens so they are not sitting in fat. I get two gallons of fat out of 450 patties.

USDA experimented with lean beef and lean patties two years ago. I really liked having less saturated meats. Unfortunately, I have not seen any of these lean meats in two years. I used to get a lot of ground turkey from USDA. It was lean, high in protein, easy to work with and the kids like it. Also, USDA has not sent us that in two years.

Lunch programs should set the right example. School lunch programs should set better and clearer standards for feeding children. Foods should be high in fiber, minerals, and protein. There should be less fast foods -- no donuts, no deep fat frying, and less processed foods.

I have been buying my own brown rice, barley, couscous, and unprocessed pastas. I wish USDA could supply those products which are whole and unprocessed. These foods are not grown or processed with chemical fertilizers. Nor are they vitamin enriched.

I worry that the trend is away from healthy lunches, freshly made-- toward bland and boring junk food.

I am worried about the trend toward a la carte foods. For those who do not know ala carte foods are not foods that USDA subsidizes. However, schools serve these ala carte foods next to the school lunch. The ala carte foods compete with the school lunch program meals. The problem is that ala carte foods are things like cheeseburgers, pizzas, deep fried french fries and chicken nuggets. All fat laden foods.

The kids often buy these foods instead of the lunch program meals. Even worse than that the system encourages the use of fast foods. A cheeseburger with a glass of milk will qualify for a USDA reimbursement.

Schools are having outside food service companies supply the lunch program. Too many schools are looking for the quick fix. There are hiring food service companies to take over their hot lunch programs. These companies are looking at how to make money -- not ways to serve the most nutritious meal. To make healthy foods for kids costs more money and takes more time.

For example, the school charges \$1.40 for our hot lunch. Out of that, 80 cents covers labors costs, around 14 cents is for milk, that leaves 46 cents for an entree, a starch, vegetables, and desert or soup. Think about that -- just 46 cents for everything else.

I am worried that the hot lunch program that I favor is becoming obsolete. I am not referring to the corporate hot lunch program brought to you by the big food service corporations. I favor the local supported lunch program using the freshest ingredients possible.

I admit that the lunch programs are in a financial squeeze. One of the problems is the large reductions in commodities donated by USDA. Another is the increasing labor and food costs.

This lack of sufficient funding at the Federal, State and local levels is becoming more and more serious. We are holding on to our hot lunch program by a string -- and I am afraid it is going to break. We, at Barre Town, get tremendous support from the community, the teachers, the school board, the principal and the superintendent to put out a quality meal. They are firmly committed to my ideas -- and that has made my job a lot easier.

The educating of school lunch providers has to become a top priority. The method of food preparation is often as important as what is prepared in terms of how healthy it is to eat. USDA itself has to set an example by setting good nutrition guidelines that mean something. The current guidelines are not specific in terms of what children should be fed.

I do not want to leave out the school breakfast program. For many children the school breakfast program is the only breakfast they will be offered.

It is all too easy to complain. Let me give you some examples of how programs can be immediately improved. First, get the parents involved. I invite the parents eat lunch with the children once every other month. I also have grandparents' day when the grandparents come in and eat lunch with their grandchildren. These programs have worked extremely well. Parents should insist that they eat at the schools. The PTA could support this program.

Classroom education is a integral part of the success of the school lunch program. Kitchen tours for younger kids make them less worried about trying new foods -- the more they know about how foods are prepared the less frightened they are about trying new items.

I go into classrooms and explain how I design nutritious menus. They learn about food groups and why I do not serve certain kinds of foods. The children are curious about trying innovative and creative foods and it gives them a broader experience.

In conclusion, I am convinced that USDA should provide more commodities that are less processed such as whole grains. USDA should provide leaner meats and they should develop more specific nutrition guidelines that benefit children.

The lunch programs need to think about preventive feeding. Healthier choices mean healthier children and healthier adults.